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J. S. Mill's *On Liberty* in Imperial Russia: Modernity and Democracy in Focus

JULIA BEREST

SURVEYING the reception of J. S. Mill's *On Liberty* in Victorian Britain, a recent study by Michael Levin has pointed out that Mill's British reviewers had paid surprisingly little attention to his warning that Britain was in danger of becoming a standstill civilization.¹ Mill's claim was either ignored or rejected as unwarranted, for his sense of alarm appeared at odds with the realities of mid-Victorian Britain. In 1859 when Mill published his book, Britain enjoyed the time of economic prosperity, growth and innovation which created a sense of optimism and pride in Britain's achievements. In the wake of the Great Exhibition it was hard for Mill's compatriots to find evidence for the abatement of genius and individuality, contrary to Mill's worry.²

Ironically, it was in autocratic Russia, a country then barely touched by capitalist modernity that Mill's words were heard loud and clear. It is because his warning resonated with the long-standing Russian debate on the nature of Western civilization and Russia's relationship with the West. Of all the themes developed in *On Liberty*, Mill's critique of Western modernity invariably attracted the attention of Russian reviewers, both on the radical side and their opponents. Two of those responses — by the socialist Alexander Herzen and the conservative Konstantin Leont'ev — are especially noteworthy for their intellectual originality and the extreme solutions they offered to the problems of modernity raised in Mill's work. Among liberal readers who held Mill in high regard as a social reformer and philosopher with socialist sympathies, Mill's fear of social and cultural

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¹ Michael Levin, *J. S. Mill on Civilization and Barbarism*, London, 2004, pp. 1–2. See also, John C. Rees, *John Stuart Mill's On Liberty*, Oxford, 1985, p. 84.

² Levin, *J. S. Mill*, pp. 3–4.

homogenization in democratic societies came as a surprise. Some of them tried to downplay or ignore it in their reviews, while others boldly, if reluctantly, ventured to confront the philosopher whose reputation stood high among the left intelligentsia. All that was in stark contrast to the reception of *On Liberty* in Victorian Britain, where Mill's reviewers barely noticed his critique of democracy, and those who did, including liberal readers, had a much different reaction than their counterparts in autocratic Russia. Examining the Russian responses to *On Liberty* illuminates the distinctiveness of the Russian discourse on progress, modernity and individual freedom, a theme that is rarely analysed from a comparative point of view. The present study also benefits Mill scholarship since Russian readers' reactions to *On Liberty* shed new light on the question recently posed by Michael Levin, namely, whether Mill's 'reservations on modern democracy qualify his liberalism'.³

* * *

In his *Autobiography*, Mill described *On Liberty* as a 'kind of philosophic textbook of a single truth'. It asserts 'the importance, to man and society, of a large variety of types of character, and of giving full freedom to human nature to expand itself'.⁴ Despite the apparent simplicity of Mill's claim, the book of 'a single truth' proved susceptible to multiple interpretations, both in Britain and internationally. The subject of Mill's investigation — the boundaries of individual freedom — remains a matter of unresolved debate, as does the concept of liberty itself. The history of the commentary on Mill's *On Liberty* reflects the historical shifts in the meaning of the concept of liberty and its varying significance in different countries and political climates. The way readers in Victorian Britain reacted to *On Liberty* was in many respects different from its reception in autocratic Russia.

When *On Liberty* was published in Britain, it was greeted with great enthusiasm by some of Mill's followers, but the majority of reviews were critical, some even openly hostile.⁵ The reviewers focused mostly

³ Ibid., p. 136.

⁴ J. S. Mill, *Autobiography*, ed. Harold Laski, London, 1924, p. 215.

⁵ See Peter Nicholson, 'The Reception and Early Reputation of Mill's Political Thought', in John Skorupski (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to John Stuart Mill*, Cambridge, 1998, pp. 464–96 (pp. 468, 470); William Stafford, *John Stuart Mill*, Basingstoke, 1998, p. 13; Rees, *Mill's On Liberty*, pp. 78–80. The reviews published in the nineteenth century are reprinted in Andrew Pyle (ed.), *Liberty: Contemporary Responses to John Stuart Mill*, South Bend,

on Mill's claim that 'self-protection' is the only legitimate reason for interfering with the liberty of the individual. In everything that concerns 'self-regarding' conduct the individual is free, even if his actions result in self-inflicted harm, such as the harm caused by excessive drinking or gambling.⁶ To this Mill's critics commonly objected that the distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding actions is often difficult, if not impossible, to draw, and that the concept of freedom advocated by Mill favours individual liberty while neglecting societal needs.⁷ Mill's strongest opponent, James Fitzjames Stephen, also argued that this kind of liberty would undermine morality and shared beliefs — two of the most important restraints that maintain society's order and coherence.⁸

This was the beginning of the controversy over Mill's 'Harm Principle', which remains one of the central issues in Mill scholarship.⁹ Much less attention, both in the nineteenth century and (more surprisingly) now, has been paid to the theme of modernity and civilizational decline in Mill's *On Liberty*. Mill's British contemporaries found it hard to agree that individuality in Britain was diminishing, still less that the progress of Western civilization was coming to a halt. Even Thomas Buckle, a great admirer of *On Liberty*, was unconvinced by Mill's argument that Europe might become 'another China' — once a thriving civilization which came to a standstill when the pressure for social conformity became irresistible.¹⁰

The British reviewers, moreover, tended to ignore Mill's warning that in Western democratic countries the main force of social conformity — the middle class — was getting more powerful and oppressive to the dissenting few. Nor did they react to Mill's concern about the effect of social and cultural homogenization in capitalist democracies. According to Mill, the assimilation of classes and nations in the modern world leads to the creation of shared and increasingly homogenous culture dominated by the middle class and oriented mainly towards a commercial ethos. Mill presented the core of this argument at the end of Chapter III ('Of Individuality'), in a particularly forceful passage. It was this passage that compelled the attention of every Russian reviewer, causing a great deal

IN, 1994; Alexander Edward (ed.), *On Liberty*, Peterborough, 1999.

⁶ See Rees, *Mill's On Liberty*, pp. 88–100; Stafford, *Mill*, p. 11.

⁷ Ibid., p. 13; Nicholson, 'The Reception', p. 468.

⁸ James Fitzjames Stephen, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* (1874), Indianapolis, IN, 1993, pp. 9–11. See also, Stuart D. Warner, 'Foreword', in *ibid.*, pp. xiv–xvi; Nicholson, 'The Reception', p. 475.

⁹ See Wendy Donner, *The Liberal Self: John Stuart Mill's Moral and Political Philosophy*, Ithaca, NY, 1991, pp. 141–59.

¹⁰ Levin, *J. S. Mill*, p. 123.

of discussion, while in Britain it went virtually unnoticed. Given the centrality of the passage to the Russian reception, it is important to quote it at some length:

The modern regime of public opinion is, in an unorganized form, what the Chinese educational and political systems are in an organized; and unless individuality shall be able successfully to assert itself against this yoke, Europe [...] will tend to become another China.

What has it that hitherto preserved Europe from this lot? What has made the European family of nations an improving, instead of a stationary portion of mankind? Not any superior excellence in them [...], but their remarkable diversity of character and culture. Individuals, classes, nations have been extremely unlike one another [...]. But it [Europe] already begins to possess this benefit in a considerable less degree [...]. Formerly, different ranks, [...] neighborhoods [...] trades and professions lived in what might be called different worlds; at present, to a great degree in the same. Comparatively speaking, they now read the same things, [...] have their hopes and fears directed to the same objects, have the same rights and liberties [...]. And assimilation is still proceeding. All the political changes of the age promote it [...]. Every extension of education promotes it [...]. Improvements in the means of communication promote it [...], the increase of commerce and manufactures promotes it [...] the desire of rising becomes no longer the character of a particular class but of all classes [...].

The combination of all these causes forms so great a mass of influences hostile to Individuality, that it is not easy to see how it can stand its ground.¹¹

* * *

Among Russian readers, Alexander Herzen was the first to comment on Mill's book in the press. An aristocrat turned socialist (and commonly known as 'the father of Russian Socialism'),¹² Herzen became a political émigré in 1847, seeking to escape the oppressive autocratic regime, which had already exiled him twice. After spending a few years in Italy and France, and still haunted by insecurity, he finally settled in London, where in 1853 he opened the Free Russian Press, hoping to influence the situation

¹¹ Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. J. B. Schneerwind, New York, 2002, pp. 74–76.

¹² See Michael Confino, 'Isaiah Berlin, Alexander Herzen and Russia's Elusive Counter-Enlightenment', in Joseph Mali and Joseph Wokler (eds), *Isaiah Berlin's Counter-Enlightenment*, Philadelphia, PA, 2003, pp. 177–92 (p. 185).

in Russia through political journalism, now safely removed from Russian censorship.¹³

Herzen expressed his response to Mill in a short but powerful essay entitled 'John Stuart Mill and his Book *On Liberty*', which first appeared in 1859 in his émigré journal, *Poliarnaia Zvezda*.¹⁴ Contrary to the title, Herzen's essay was not intended to be merely a review of Mill's book. As Herzen's biographer noted, Herzen 'never wrote a line that was not a polemic against someone'.¹⁵ The essay on Mill was no exception.

For many years Herzen had been involved in the Slavophile-Westernizer controversy over the questions of Russia's identity, historical destiny and relationship with the West.¹⁶ At the heart of the debate, which began in the late 1830s, was a contentious issue whether Western Europe presented a progressive model worthy to emulate in Russia, or it was, as the Slavophiles contended, a civilization in decline, utterly alien to Russia and useful only as an example to be avoided. In Russia, a country which stood on the verge of a new economic age and could already observe the effect of industrial modernity on Western society, the answer to this question was perceived to imply an existential choice between two alternative modes of modernity — one based on individualistic values and Western-style liberal institutions and the other rooted in a collectivist ethos, Orthodox spirituality and patriarchal institutions which had always distinguished Russian history. Herzen, however, tried to find a middle path.

Initially closer to Westernizers, Herzen gradually warmed to the Slavophile idea that Russia's future depended on the survival of the commune — the oldest and, in their view, the most authentic of Russian institutions which embodied the true essence of the Russian national spirit. His drift away from Westernizers was also influenced by the French utopians Louis Blanc and Pierre Proudhon, whose works introduced

¹³ On Herzen, see Martin Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism, 1812–1855*, Cambridge, 1961.

¹⁴ Reprinted in *Poliarnaia Zvezda, zhurnal A. I. Herzena i N. P. Ogareva*, ed. M. Nechkina, 9 vols, Moscow, 1961, 5, pp. 181–93. Herzen also included it in his memoirs *Byloe i Dumy (My Past and Thoughts)* first published in London in 1861–66. A. Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts: The Memoirs of Alexander Herzen*, trans. Constance Garnett, introduction Isaiah Berlin, 4 vols, New York, 1968, 3, pp. 1075–85.

¹⁵ Malia, *Herzen*, p. 356.

¹⁶ On the controversy, see Andrzej Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to Marxism*, Stanford, CA, 1979, pp. 92–114; Wayne Dowler, 'The Intelligentsia and Capitalism', in William Leatherbarrow and Derek Offord (eds), *A History of Russian Thought*, Cambridge, 2010, pp. 263–84 (pp. 263–71); Iver B. Neumann, *Russia and the Idea of Europe*, London, 1996, pp. 48–49.

Herzen to the socialist critique of bourgeois society.¹⁷ Out of this mixture of conservative nationalist and socialist ideas Herzen forged a theory of Populist socialism which reflected a paradoxical combination of the Russian idea of communal equality and the quintessentially Western notion of individuality. He envisioned the new society as a federation of self-governing communes in which the individual's right to dignity, autonomy and self-expression would be affirmed through the principles of freedom, equality and 'a guaranteed minimum of material well-being'.¹⁸

The contours of this theory and Herzen's low opinion of bourgeois society emerged even before he had a chance to visit Western Europe, quite to the dismay of his more moderate friends who travelled to the West and found much to admire.¹⁹ Once Herzen arrived in Paris in 1847, his first-hand observations of the bourgeois way of life and capitalist inequalities only strengthened his conviction that Western civilization was in terminal decline. He was appalled by what he saw as the philistine shallow culture of the French bourgeoisie driven by a money-making mentality and narrow class interests.²⁰ His perception of England was somewhat more positive, mostly due to his appreciation of Britain's political tolerance and freedom of expression, which Herzen used to his full advantage. But his attitude towards bourgeois Victorian values and lifestyle was contemptuous. Even after many years in London, Herzen remained something of an outsider, carefully guarding his children from getting 'corrupted' by Victorian love for domesticity and social decorum.²¹

When *On Liberty* came out, Herzen was delighted to find in it the ideas and sentiments that echoed his own diagnosis of the ills which afflicted Western civilization. He opened his essay on Mill by proudly reminding Russian readers that, ten years before Mill's book, he had already raised an alarm about Europe's decline in his 'Letters from the Avenue Marigny' published in *Sovremennik*. Back then, he noted, his 'gloomy view of Europe' had caused 'indignation' among his 'friends and unfriends' in Russia. But if angry, socialist-inspired critique was not convincing to them, they should listen to the words of John Stuart Mill, 'one of the most celebrated political economists' who 'enjoys enormous, well merited authority' in

¹⁷ Malia, *Herzen*, pp. 302–32; Walicki, *History*, pp. 162–65.

¹⁸ Malia, *Herzen*, p. 418. See also, Walicki, *History*, pp. 169–71.

¹⁹ Judith E. Zimmerman, *Mid-Passage: Alexander Herzen and European Revolution, 1847–1852*, Pittsburgh, PA, 1989, p. 11, and 'Introduction', in Alexander Herzen, *Letters from France and Italy*, ed. Judith E. Zimmerman, Pittsburgh, PA, 1995, p. xiii.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 29, 32.

²¹ See Zimmerman, 'Introduction', p. xxx, and *Mid-Passage*, pp. 213–14.

England, compelling the attention of both Tories and Whigs. If a thinker as calm and respectable as Mill is driven to 'cr[y] "We are drowning!"' it proves, Herzen argued, that 'things in Europe have become darker, more suffocating' in recent years.²²

Herzen then cited the most dramatic of Mill's arguments regarding the impending crisis: his contention that the individuals are already 'lost in the crowd' and that public opinion is dominated by 'collective mediocrity' that stands on guard against everything original and daring.²³ He was particularly impressed by Mill's point that European civilization, for all its rich intellectual legacy, is in danger of becoming stagnant, much like China, in which the pressure for social conformity makes everyone alike and puts a break on progress.²⁴ For Herzen, who had previously compared Europe to the Roman Empire in its final stages, the China metaphor in Mill's work seemed a powerful vindication of his own verdict. He was also eager to quote (not entirely accurately) Mill's words that in Britain the public which oppresses the individual is 'composed of the *middle class*', a statement Herzen italicized for greater rhetorical effect.²⁵

Herzen's essay on Mill is commonly viewed as evidence of the intellectual affinities between the two thinkers and Mill's subsequent influence on Herzen.²⁶ For both of them the concept of individual liberty was, in the words of Isaiah Berlin, 'the holy of holies' which defined their social and political philosophy.²⁷ Both defended the right to individuality, but not unfettered individualism and selfishness. Like Mill, Herzen sought to find a compromise between the demands of individual freedom and the needs of society at large.

Herzen was the first one to use the word 'mediocrity' in reference to the European middle class.²⁸ When Mill hit the middle class with an even

²² Herzen, *My Past*, pp. 1075–77.

²³ In the 1968 edition, the translator inaccurately rendered the term as 'conglomerated mediocrity'. When Herzen first mentions Mill's expression, he cites it in English ('collective mediocrity'). Subsequently he renders it into Russian as '*sbornaia posredstvennos*' which in this context should be translated as 'collective mediocrity'. See also, A. Gerzen, *Byloe i dumy*, Moscow, 1958, p. 61.

²⁴ Herzen, *My Past*, pp. 1080–81.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1081. In the original text, the words 'middle class' are not italicized and Mill adds a qualifying word 'chiefly'. See Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 68.

²⁶ Aileen Kelly, 'Historical Diffidence: A New Look at an Old Russian Debate', *Common Knowledge*, 8, 2002, 3, pp. 496–515 (p. 508); Lois S. Becker, "'Collective Mediocrity': Alexander Herzen and J. S. Mill on European Culture", *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 19, 1995, pp. 41–61 (p. 42).

²⁷ Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, p. 102.

²⁸ He used the expression 'arrogant mediocrity' in his *Fourth Letter* published in 1847.

more biting label — ‘collective mediocrity’ — Herzen was struck by the forcefulness of Mill’s expression. Mill’s book, he wrote, ‘goes far beyond anything that I have said [...], thanks be to those who after us confirm with their authority what we have said, and with their talent clearly and forcefully hand on what we have feebly expressed’.²⁹ Ironically, Mill’s *On Liberty* — a classic work in liberal philosophy — lent credibility to Herzen’s arguments in his controversy against Russian liberals. Armed with Mill’s contemptuous label, he would continue to attack the bourgeois mores and lifestyle in his later polemical works.³⁰ Mill’s book, moreover, bolstered Herzen’s self-image as a daring, undaunted intellectual who was not afraid of voicing unconventional ideas. Without saying it explicitly, Herzen’s triumphant tone made it clear that he saw himself as one of those ‘gifted few’ whose originality and sense of autonomy could serve as a counterweight to the pressures of collective mediocrity, as Mill envisioned in *On Liberty*. It is telling that the first Russian translation of *On Liberty* carried a dedication to Herzen (by an anonymous translator), which was printed on a separate page in large font, with the words ‘as a sign of deep respect’. The book was published in Leipzig in 1861, three years before *On Liberty* was approved by censors for publication in Russia.³¹

In a way, Herzen was a more perceptive reader of *On Liberty* than many of Mill’s compatriots who could not understand his worry over the decline of individuality and social freedom in modern society. Thomas Macaulay once caustically noted that Mill in *On Liberty* was ‘crying “Fire!” in Noah’s flood’.³² It did not seem so to Herzen who tended to observe Western society with an eye of an outsider, a bit like Mill himself.³³ While he did not deny the technological benefits of modern civilization³⁴ (neither did Mill),³⁵ he shared Mill’s concern that the tendency for cultural homogenization generated by modernity was becoming a threat to individual creativity and self-expression. Before the term ‘mass culture’ was invented, both thinkers

Herzen, *Letters*, p. 58.

²⁹ Herzen, *My Past*, p. 1076.

³⁰ See Becker, “‘Collective Mediocrity’”, p. 41; Robert Harris, ‘Alexander Herzen: Writings on the Man and his Thought’, in Kathleen Parte (ed.), *A Herzen Reader*, Evanston, IL, 2012, pp. 343–70 (p. 360).

³¹ Apparently the book was smuggled into Russia but remained little known to the general public. There were no reviews following this edition.

³² Quoted in Richard Reeves, *John Stuart Mill: Victorian Firebrand*, London, 2007, p. 300.

³³ See Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850–1930*, Oxford, 1991, p. 133.

³⁴ See Zemmerman, *Mid-passage*, p. 33.

³⁵ See Nicholas Capaldi, *John Stuart Mill*, Cambridge, 2004, p. 198.

sensed that in Western society people had become a collective entity subject to constant changes from without, not all of which are driven by considerations of beauty or even convenience.³⁶

However, the similarities between Herzen and Mill should not be overstated. In Herzen, the critique of Western society was ultimately rooted in his distaste for capitalist economy with its social inequality and politics dominated by the bourgeoisie. Much more than Mill, Herzen was disturbed by what he perceived as the money-grabbing mentality and political contentment of the bourgeoisie.³⁷ Once a dynamic historical agent, the bourgeoisie, he argued, had become a conservative force eager to preserve its newly acquired political privileges and comfortable lifestyle. There was also a strong implication in his writings that the bourgeoisie lacked intelligence and education to sustain Europe's cultural heritage and progress. Unable to appreciate higher ideals, the middle class, he argued, was mediocre in its interests and hostile to originality.³⁸

By contrast, Mill saw the root of the problem in the persistence of religious intolerance among the British middle class. Although Mill was discreet in his discussion of religion and refused to publicly answer the question whether he was a Christian or not, many statements in *On Liberty* suggest that he viewed religion as a major impediment to progress and individual freedom.³⁹ In a passage where Mill censures religious prohibitions against public amusements as an example of social tyranny over the individual, he points blame at the middle class and their religiously inspired social conservatism. Would it not be better, he asked, 'for these intrusively pious members of society to mind their own business?'⁴⁰ While Herzen ascribed the bourgeoisie's political contentment and lack of civic virtue to their position as an economically dominant class, Mill was more inclined to blame religion for those alleged shortcomings. Christianity, he argued, 'is essentially a doctrine of passive obedience; it inculcates submission to all authorities found established'.⁴¹ In some of his earlier works Mill did make critical remarks about the spirit

³⁶ Herzen, *My Past*, p. 1081; Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 73.

³⁷ Herzen, *Letters*, pp. 52, 57.

³⁸ Herzen, *My Past*, p. 1080.

³⁹ See Joseph Hamburger, 'Religion and *On Liberty*', in Michael Laine (ed.), *A Cultivated Mind: Essays on J. S. Mill Presented to John M. Robson*, Toronto, ON, 1991, pp. 139–81 (p. 155); Bruce L. Kinzer, *J. S. Mill Revisited: Biographical and Political Explorations*, New York, 2007, p. 20; Alan P. F. Sell, *Mill on God: the Pervasiveness and Illusiveness of Mill's Religious Thought*, Eugene, OR, 2004, p. 1.

⁴⁰ Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 90.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

of acquisitiveness displayed by the middle class,⁴² but *On Liberty* made no such comments and some of Mill's statements clearly showed that he was not opposed to entrepreneurial attitudes.⁴³ His main worry was that 'business' was becoming the 'only' sphere where 'energetic characters' could find application for their energy.⁴⁴ But this was a far cry from Herzen's wholesale indictment of the bourgeoisie and capitalist society.

Herzen was well aware of his differences with Mill. Having expressed his gratitude to the English thinker for raising the topic, he did not shy away from criticizing Mill for his political moderation. To admit 'this deterioration of individuality, this want of temper', he argued, 'is a very important step towards the way out; but it is not the way out'.⁴⁵ He reproached Mill for not being able to see that the 'absence of energetic men is not a cause but a consequence'.⁴⁶ This happens, Herzen argued, when 'the dominant, active, *historic* part of a people approaches a form of life that suits it', becoming a conservative guardian of the existing order.⁴⁷ To hope that 'shopkeepers' would turn into 'heroes' through some kind of 'spiritual gymnastics', as Herzen scornfully put it, is a wishful thinking.⁴⁸

For Herzen, the world of 'shopkeepers' is beyond repair; the only solution is to do away with it altogether.⁴⁹ Unlike Mill, who sought a corrective to the deficiencies of parliamentary democracy, Herzen never had any faith in representative government. He called it a 'cunning device' worse than absolutist monarchy because universal suffrage, in his view, created only an illusion of liberty and power sharing.⁵⁰ Nor did he believe, in contrast to Mill, that the capitalist system could be remedied to make it more equitable and fair for everyone. Rather than reforming capitalism, he thought it better for Russia to skip it altogether, moving straight to communal polity while industrial capitalism was still in its infancy in Russia.⁵¹

⁴² See Capaldi, *Mill*, pp. 138, 153, 155; V. W. Bladen, 'J. S. Mill's *Principles*: A Centenary Estimate', in John Cunningham Wood (ed.), *John Stuart Mill: Critical Assessments*, 4 vols, London, 1999, 2, pp. 98–108 (p. 104).

⁴³ Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 72.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Herzen, *My Past*, p. 1078.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 1082.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 1081.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 1078.

⁴⁹ On Herzen's revolutionary ideas, see Malia, *Herzen*, pp. 222, 365, 382, 408; Zimmerman, 'Introduction', pp. xxix–xxx.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Derek Offord, 'Alexander Herzen', in G. M. Hamburg and Randall Poole (eds), *A History of Russian Philosophy 1830–1930*, Cambridge, 2010, p. 65. See also, Malia, *Herzen*, p. 372; Zimmerman, *Mid-Passage*, p. 59.

⁵¹ Walicki, *History*, pp. 165, 172–73.

This must be the reason why Herzen in his review ignored Mill's ideas of how the problem of cultural decline can be rectified within the existing conditions. Instead, he enlisted *On Liberty* to strengthen his own argument that Western civilization was in deep decline and that the logic of history required new social forces to bring about the renovation of European society.⁵² Whether the European working classes were ready to become an agent of change was a question Herzen could not answer with certainty, but he was convinced that only two alternatives awaited Western civilization: either it will become 'the China foretold by John Stuart Mill' and kept in existence by the labour of those living in 'ignorance and hunger' or it will see a 'social revolution'.⁵³

Herzen's political journalism caught the attention of Mill himself, who expressed the desire to meet the Russian émigré. In a letter to Grant Duff dated 20 March 1859 Mill wrote: 'I shall be happy to see Mr. Herzen' upon returning from Paris, 'if he should then wish it'. He then added: 'I am obliged to Mr. Herzen for his writings, and shall have the pleasure in reading them. But I have not seen any one of them.'⁵⁴ It is not known whether the meeting actually took place and which of Herzen's writings Mill had in mind, but four years later Mill mentioned Herzen again, this time in connection with Herzen's publications on the 1863 Polish Insurrection against Russia. Judging from Mill's words in his letter to Edwin Chadwick, Mill used Herzen's articles in the *Bell* as one of his sources when writing 'A Letter on Poland' which was published in the *Penny Newsman*. In the concluding paragraph of his letter to Chadwick Mill praised Herzen and his collaborator Nikolai Ogarev for 'shaking the whole fabric of Russian despotism' with their publications.⁵⁵

This glorious reputation as a radical journalist was exactly the kind of image Herzen passionately desired and cultivated, as his monumental autobiography made clear. A wealthy nobleman turned socialist whose keen sense of justice led him to devote his life to the cause of undermining the Russian autocracy — this is the portrait of Herzen that still dominates his biographies in Russia and the West. Some scholars have pointed out that Herzen's writings on Western society reveal more about his political motives than he was willing to admit: apart from a sense of indignation over social and economic injustices, his critique of capitalist society conveys anti-Western nationalism and a great deal of aristocratic disdain

⁵² See also, Becker, "Collective Mediocrity", pp. 41–42.

⁵³ Herzen, *My Past*, pp. 1084–85. Italics are Herzen's.

⁵⁴ J. S. Mill, *Collected Works*, ed. J. M. Robson, 33 vols, Toronto, ON, 1963–1991, 15, p. 607.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 25, p. 1204.

towards the bourgeoisie,⁵⁶ which might have been fuelled by his nostalgia for Russia and the difficulty adjusting to life in a foreign culture.⁵⁷ Even so, Herzen's portrayal in modern scholarship remains largely 'hagiographic' and based heavily on his self-representation in *My Past and Thoughts*.⁵⁸

There was, however, more to his life than met the eye. Derek Offord has recently uncovered the details of Herzen's financial affairs and his close relationship with the House of Rothschild — 'that most unsocialistic institution', to use Offord's words — which provided Herzen with advice on capital investment and assistance transferring his assets from Russia to the West.⁵⁹ While Herzen blasted the bourgeoisie for their 'morality [...] based on arithmetic',⁶⁰ his financial history presents a person who not only readily engaged in financial dealings but also expressed satisfaction and excitement when his investments were successful.⁶¹ It might be said in his defence that for Herzen (much like for Mill)⁶² material well-being was not an end in itself but a means of personal freedom which enabled him to become a public voice for the cause of justice and liberty. Despite his socialist sympathies, he never repudiated private property or even the possession of wealth as such, provided that money-making was not a primary goal in life. As he remarked in one of his 'Letters', 'money is a fine thing. I like it very much. Hatred for money is not an issue at all, but that a decent person should not subordinate everything to it'.⁶³ And yet, sensitive to the possible charge of duplicity and conflict of interests, Herzen was careful to understate in his autobiography the scope of his financial dealings and the degree of his involvement with James Rothschild.⁶⁴ He always cherished his reputation as a figure of inspiration for the younger generation of Russian radicals.⁶⁵ In retrospect, more disturbing than

⁵⁶ See Thomas C. Owen, *Russian Corporate Capitalism from Peter the Great to Perestroika*, Oxford, 1995, pp. 118–19; Malia, *Herzen*, pp. 327, 365; Walicki, *History*, p. 171.

⁵⁷ See Zimmerman, *Mid-Passage*, pp. 136–39, but in her positive assessment of Herzen, Zimmerman prefers to speak of Herzen's 'nationalism' and 'idealization of Russia' rather than xenophobia or disdain for the West.

⁵⁸ See Derek Offord's critical reassessment of Herzen's portrayal in modern scholarship. Derek Offord, 'Alexander Herzen and James de Rothschild', *Toronto Slavic Quarterly* 19, 2007, p. 2 <<http://sites.utoronto.ca/tsq/19/offord19.shtml>> [accessed April 10, 2017], and 'Isaiah Berlin and the Russian Intelligentsia', in Laurence Brockliss and Ritchie Robertson (eds), *Isaiah Berlin and the Russian Enlightenment*, Oxford, 2016, pp. 187–202 (pp. 192–98).

⁵⁹ Offord, 'Alexander Herzen', p. 10.

⁶⁰ Herzen, *Letters*, p. 30.

⁶¹ See Offord, 'Alexander Herzen', pp. 7, 12.

⁶² On Mill's attitude towards material wealth, see Capaldi, *Mill*, p. 153.

⁶³ Herzen, *Letters*, p. 25.

⁶⁴ Offord, 'Alexander Herzen', pp. 13–14.

⁶⁵ See L. P. Shelgunova, *Iz dalekogo proshlogo*, St Petersburg, 1902, p. 90. Shelgunova

Herzen's concealed life as a financial dealer was the fact that his invectives against the bourgeoisie, as Offord has pointed out, influenced the Russian intelligentsia against the idea of capitalist modernity, paving the way to the ascendancy of Marxism in Russia.⁶⁶

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Mill's *On Liberty* also attracted the attention of Konstantin Leont'ev, another notorious anti-Westerner with ties to Slavophiles whose dislike of the European bourgeoisie had much in common with Herzen (as he himself acknowledged),⁶⁷ despite their fundamental differences on the issue of Russia's historical destiny. Like Herzen, he saw in Western Europe nothing but the symptoms of the impending demise of the once flourishing civilization, but unlike his socialist-inspired compatriot, Leont'ev was a political conservative who wished to freeze Russia in its present condition, before it got 'contaminated' by Western ideas of equality, 'universal prosperity' and 'rational middle class happiness'.⁶⁸ For his unconventional views of morality and anti-egalitarian criticism of European modernity, Leont'ev was later considered a precursor of the Nietzschean tradition of anti-modernism which inspired a number of Russian *fin-de-siècle* thinkers.⁶⁹ Some ten years before Nietzsche, Leont'ev wrote that injustices and sufferings can be an invigorating force, and that social inequality (similar to the diversity of species in nature) is conducive to creative energy and progress. Where universal well-being increases, civilization, according to Leont'ev, becomes homogenous, shallow and stagnant. 'A mixture of fear and passion — this is what human societies should live by if they want to live.'⁷⁰

Leont'ev was convinced that if Russia continued along the path of Western-style liberal reforms, the result would be the establishment of a

recalled that visiting Herzen in his London home ('na poklon k Gertzenu') was a special experience, akin to a religious pilgrimage, which they sought while travelling abroad in 1858. They listened to Herzen 'with reverence' ('s blagogoveniem') enchanted by his 'incredibly beautiful mind and energy'.

⁶⁶ Offord, 'Alexander Herzen', pp. 2, 16–17.

⁶⁷ See S. V. Khatuntsev, *Konstantin Leont'ev: intellectual'naia biografiia 1850–1874*, St Petersburg, 2007, pp. 83–88, 93; Iu. P. Ivask, 'Konstantin Leont'ev', in D. K. Burlaka (ed.), *Konstantin Leont'ev: Pro et Contra*, 2 vols, St Petersburg, 1995, 1, pp. 229–600 (pp. 443, 449).

⁶⁸ Quoted in Walicki, *History*, p. 300. See also, S. N. Trubetskoi, 'Razocharovannyi slavianofil', in Burlaka (ed.), *Leont'ev*, 1, pp. 123–59 (p. 125).

⁶⁹ Mihailo Mikhailov, 'The Great Catalyzer: Nietzsche and Russian Neo-Idealism', in Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (ed.), *Nietzsche in Russia*, Princeton, NJ, 1986, pp. 127–45 (p. 135); Khatuntsev, *Leont'ev*, p. 73; N. A. Berdiaev, 'K. Leont'ev — filosof reaktsionnoi romantiki', in Burlaka (ed.), *Leont'ev*, 1, pp. 208–34 (pp. 212, 215); Walicki, *History*, p. 300.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Berdiaev, 'K. Leont'ev', p. 212.

socialist regime unparalleled in despotism over the individual.⁷¹ Unlike Herzen, Leont'ev made no distinction between liberal and socialist teachings. To him, both ideologies lead in one direction — the creation of a society in which philistine happiness is valued above everything else and a purely utilitarian attitude prevails over the aesthetics of life. Both ideologies, he argued, tend towards levelling and simplification of society, which ultimately results in the cultural death of the social organism.⁷² As for Western Europe, he predicted that all states would 'converge into a pan-European federation' at a cost of 'tear[ing] itself loose from all local quirks, from all proud traditions'.⁷³

It is possible that Leont'ev first learned of Mill's work from Herzen's essay,⁷⁴ and it was Herzen's one-sided interpretation of Mill as a critic of the bourgeois culture that influenced Leont'ev's perception of *On Liberty*. Not only did Leont'ev read the entire book in the original, he translated Chapters III and IV from *On Liberty* and published them (anonymously) in the journal *Russkii Invalid* in 1862.⁷⁵ The translation was accompanied by a relatively short but catchy introduction, very typical of Leont'ev's arresting writing style.

'Why bother reading Mill [in Russia]?', he asked readers in the very first sentence. Some might say, he continued, that in Russia it is not oppressiveness but the weakness of public opinion that presents a problem. 'We suffer from indifference, not from intolerance [...]. Our public opinion is divided and feeble [...]. Russia is not homogenous and narrow-minded; rather, its soul is depraved [and] unruly. Why would we speak against the [pressure] of public opinion and moral puritanism [*blagonravie*]?'⁷⁶ 'This is all true', Leont'ev agreed. Russia is much more ethnically diverse, decentralized and socially divided to be concerned about uniformity and enforced moral correctness that 'frighten Mill' so much. But Mill's work, Leont'ev wrote, offers much more than that; it provides an 'original and bold' 'view of liberty'.⁷⁷

What makes it bold, according to Leont'ev, is Mill's recognition that democracy 'can be deadly [*ubiystvennyi*] for individuality', whereas

⁷¹ Walicki, *History*, p. 304; Ivask, 'Leont'ev', p. 447.

⁷² See *ibid.*, p. 435.

⁷³ Quoted in Neumann, *Russia*, p. 66.

⁷⁴ According to Khatuntsev, Leont'ev read Herzen extensively. See Khatuntsev, *Leont'ev*, p. 83.

⁷⁵ [K. Leont'ev] 'Mnenie Dzhona Stuarda Millia o lichnosti', in Konstantin Leont'ev, *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii i pisem*, ed. V. A. Kotelnikov, 12 vols, St Petersburg, 2000, 7, pt. 1, pp. 7–48. For the history of publication, see Leont'ev, *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii*, 7, pt 2, p. 529.

⁷⁶ 'Mnenie', pp. 7–8.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

individuality 'should be the end goal [of societal development]'.⁷⁸ Leont'ev was struck by Mill's argument that the establishment of representative government does not mean, contrary to common assumptions, that the individual will be free from oppression. Here Leont'ev referred to the opening paragraphs of Chapter I where Mill wrote that characterizing democracy as 'self-government' or 'the power of the people over themselves' is misleading because 'the will of the people [...] practically means the will of the most numerous or the most active *part* of the people; the majority, or those who succeed in making themselves accepted as the majority'. This leads to a new form of tyranny, 'the tyranny of the majority' which, according to Mill, is 'more formidable than many kinds of political oppression, since [...] it leaves fewer means of escape'.⁷⁹ Leont'ev could not agree more. He noted the irony behind the paradox of democracy exposed by Mill: what is commonly taken as a progressive development in the evolution of society reveals, at a closer look, the tendency to suppress the very engine of progress — originality and freedom of expression. 'You should not think', he wrote sarcastically, 'that this is the end of story when the nation establishes its own responsible government to rule over itself'.⁸⁰

However, Leont'ev's explication of Mill's argument about the shortcomings of modern democracy sounded sharper, more critical and straightforward than the original. 'In one place', Leont'ev wrote, 'Mill boldly points out that the successes of democracy in Western Europe and the United States are killing [*gubiat*] diversity and originality'.⁸¹ Leont'ev read *On Liberty* as a work criticizing modern democracy and Western bourgeois culture from the ethical and aesthetic point of view. This is the reason he chose to translate only those chapters which contained most of Mill's critical remarks about the middle class and public opinion in Western society. He especially liked Chapter III ('Of the Individuality'), while Chapter II ('Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion') Leont'ev declared 'less typical of Mill' (*menee Millevskaia*). To draw readers attention to some of Mill's critical statements, Leont'ev used italics or made new paragraphs in his translation: for instance, when he translated Mill's words that 'no government by democracy or a numerous aristocracy [...] ever did or could rise above mediocrity'.⁸² In Leont'ev's interpretation, Mill's work suggests that in democracy public opinion is the power with

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

⁷⁹ Mill, *On Liberty*, pp. 6–7.

⁸⁰ 'Mnenie', p. 9.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 11.

⁸² Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 68. See also, 'Mnenie', p. 22. For other examples, see *ibid.*, pp. 12, 15, 19, 21, 28.

no checks and balances. It issues and executes its own decrees. More than in any other polity, the individual is subjected to the will of a single political community which exercises its influence by virtue of the majority principle. 'Where there is consensus of the majority', he wrote, 'there develops not the rule of each individual over himself but the rule of each over everyone else'.⁸³

Interestingly, Leont'ev warned readers that in Russian society too, distinct personalities were not free from the pressure for conformity. 'The despotism of the deadly golden mean [*smertonosnoi zolotoi serediny*] is not so frightening to us [the Russians]', but don't we, Leont'ev asked, also have a habit of judging each other and telling other people what they should do with their lives?⁸⁴ Like a person walking carefully through swampy water, the individual with distinct personality should always beware of the pressure of dominant views and customs. It is imperative for such individuals to be themselves and 'cultivate bold independence'.⁸⁵ Implicitly, Leont'ev's observation suggested that in any society, whether autocratic or capitalist-democratic, the power of tradition and public disapprobation can be stifling for non-conformist individuals. Yet, he seems to have been oblivious to the implications of his own remark. For the rest of his life Leont'ev would continue to attack democracy and bourgeois values as the biggest threat to European culture and civilization.

No doubt, Leont'ev counted himself among the individuals who needed to guard their individuality against the encroachments of the public. As the philosopher Vladimir Solov'ev remembered later, Leont'ev's 'greatest fear' had always been to 'be average [*byt' ploskim*], to be like everyone else', even though he paid a heavy price for his independence — very few people shared and appreciated Leont'ev's ideas during his lifetime.⁸⁶ 'He found himself', in the words of another contemporary, "a voice crying in the wilderness" but true to his nature, 'he carried out his duty cheerfully [*bodro stoial na svoem postu*] and "cried [*vopiyal*] in the wilderness".⁸⁷

After Leont'ev's death, when his thought began to attract more attention in Russia, it was his fierce intellectual independence and boldness of ideas that earned him acclaim from some prominent Russian thinkers.⁸⁸

⁸³ 'Mnenie', pp. 9–10.

⁸⁴ Ibid. pp. 8–9.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

⁸⁶ V. S. Solov'ev, 'Pamiati K. N. Leont'eva', in Burlaka (ed.), *Leont'ev*, 1, pp. 20–26 (p. 21).

⁸⁷ Iu. N. Govorukha-Otrok, 'Neskol'ko slov po povodu konchiny K. N. Leont'eva', in Burlaka, (ed.), *Leont'ev*, 1, pp. 15–19 (p. 17).

⁸⁸ N. A. Berdiaev, 'K. Leont'ev — filosof reaktsionnoi romantiki', in Burlaka (ed.), *Leont'ev*, 1, pp. 208–34 (pp. 214–15); Solov'ev, 'Pamiati', pp. 20–21; Trubetskoi, 'Razocharovannyi

Peter Struve called him ‘the sharpest mind produced by Russian culture in the nineteenth century’.⁸⁹ Vasilii Rozanov wrote of Leont’ev that ‘he was the first to understand the essence of nineteenth-century historical development, overcom[ing] for the first time the notion of progress’ then dominant in the Russian thought.⁹⁰ The revolution of 1917 and the tragic events that followed appeared to validate Leont’ev’s pessimistic predictions about Russia and European civilization. For religious philosopher Berdiaev, now in exile, Leont’ev was no longer ‘a mad dreamer’ and ‘unhappy romantic’⁹¹ but a ‘unique’ thinker who ‘predicted the advent of fascism’ and sensed ‘the catastrophic tempo of history’.⁹² In today’s Russia Leont’ev is rediscovered once again, this time in the context of the debate on European integration and Russia’s relationship with the West in the post-Communist era.⁹³

Ironically, Leont’ev’s path down the road of conservatism began with his reading of Herzen and Mill in the late 1850s to early ’60s.⁹⁴ Looking back at his formative years, Leont’ev wrote: ‘Any person, no matter how original and talented, must (especially early in life) be subjected to various influences.’ At first, he recalled, it was George Sand and Vissarion Belinskii (the staple of mid-century Russian liberals) as well as ‘medical materialism’ that influenced his world-view. Then came the turn of the socialist Herzen, the Slavophile Khomiakov and the liberal Mill — all very different thinkers, whose ideas Leont’ev absorbed selectively, or ‘in part’ (*otchasti*), as he himself put it. ‘By the age of thirty-five’, he concluded, ‘I already had my own clear world-view and patriotic hopes’.⁹⁵ Judging from the fact that Leont’ev’s essay on Mill was his first venture into the field of socio-political ideas, *On Liberty* proved a major catalyst in Leont’ev’s philosophical maturation. Prior to 1862, his published works included only literary criticism and fiction.

The most important idea he took away from *On Liberty* was that democracy threatened cultural civilization by ‘killing’ diversity and

slavianofil’, p. 137.

⁸⁹ Quoted in Khatuntsev, *Leont’ev*, p. 12.

⁹⁰ Rozanov, ‘Esteticheskoe ponimanie istorii’, in Burlaka (ed.), *K. N. Leont’ev*, 1, pp. 27–124 (p. 37).

⁹¹ Berdiaev, ‘K. Leont’ev’, p. 210.

⁹² Quoted in V. Iu. Katasonov, *Russkaia sotsiologicheskaiia mysl’ na rubezhe XIX–XX vekov*, Moscow, 2015, pp. 36–37.

⁹³ See Khatuntsev, *Leont’ev*, p. 13.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 35, 39, 82–85.

⁹⁵ Quoted in I. Fundel, ‘K. Leont’ev i V. Solov’ev v ikh vzaimootnosheniiakh’, in Burlaka (ed.) *Leont’ev*, 1, p. 406.

individuality.⁹⁶ In 1872 he returned to this topic in a more extended essay entitled, 'The Average European as an Ideal and Instrument of Universal Destruction'.⁹⁷ By that time his attitude towards Mill began to change, as did his expectations for the future. The title of the essay, as Leont'ev noted in a letter to a friend, spoke for itself.⁹⁸ It provided a stronger warning and more pessimistic predictions of what might happen if the world continued down the path of democratic modernity. The end result, according to Leont'ev, will be the culture of the 'European bourgeois' — 'something average, neither a peasant nor a nobleman, neither a soldier nor a priest [...], neither a Tyrolian nor a Circassian'. This 'petty cultural type' is always satisfied with itself and desires only one thing — to bring the whole world to a single denominator of averageness.⁹⁹ But now that 'capitalism has reached its peak', Leont'ev argued, 'communist aspirations continue to grow' as a counterweight to capitalism.¹⁰⁰ The homogenization of society, he warned, will be much stronger under communist rule, where, in addition to uniform education and lifestyle, 'the general fear' will ensure social conformity. It will be a society of 'immobile equality', with new infringements on individual freedom and 'mandatory membership in corporate groups'.¹⁰¹

The spectre of social and ethnic-cultural homogenization that Leont'ev raised in this essay indicated how far he had drifted in a conservative direction since the early 1860s. Rather than focusing on the freedom of non-conformist individuals, his main concern now was the reduction of socio-economic differences between individuals and social groups as well as the disappearance of cultural distinctions among Western nations, all of which, according to Leont'ev, was triggered by modern technological advances and the spread of education.¹⁰² This process, he noted, is commonly known as 'egalitarian-liberal movement', or 'democratization', but Leont'ev preferred to call it 'secondary simplifying homogenization' (*vtorichnoe uproshchaiushchee smeshenie*) by analogy with a living organism which goes through the final stage of decline, approaching death.¹⁰³

⁹⁶ 'Mnenie', p. 11.

⁹⁷ K. Leont'ev, 'Srednii Evropeets kak ideal i orudie vseirnogo razrusheniia', in idem, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 9 vols, St Petersburg, 1912, 6, pp. 5–79.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. i.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 63.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., pp. 58–59.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 22, 59.

¹⁰² Ibid., pp. 5–7, 14–15.

¹⁰³ Ibid., pp. 16, 65. On Leont'ev's theory of social evolution, see Walicki, *History*, pp. 301–02; Katasonov, *Russkaia sotsiologicheskaiia mysl'*, pp. 50–51.

Leont'ev saw cultural and social homogenization as interrelated: with the compression of social classes into a single middle class, not only would the high culture created by the nobility become more shallow and banal, but also authentic national cultures cease to exist. What will happen to literature, poetry and art, he asked, if people and nations become so much alike? The best novelists, like Sand, Dickens and Balzac, always draw inspiration from the struggle between opposite human characters and different national types, between wealth and poverty, between highly educated minds and those clouded by superstition. Today's mediocre bourgeois culture is 'so uninspiring' for artists.¹⁰⁴ Modern technology is also 'hostile' to the world of literature and art. 'You cannot reconcile poetry and utility', he lamented. All the new inventions serve as a formidable tool in the hands of the emerging middle class seeking domination over nature and society, but the price to pay is destruction of organic nature and ultimately, of human society itself.¹⁰⁵ With the spread of universal well-being, equality and freedom, Leont'ev concluded, history will come to an end.¹⁰⁶

Writing many years after he first encountered the theme of bourgeois 'mediocrity' in Herzen and Mill, Leont'ev's tone was now more anguished and alarmed. He stood alone in his desperate cry to arrest the process which Leont'ev thought lethal to European civilization. Many European thinkers, he wrote, took note of the growing homogenization of nations, cultures and social classes, but rather than fighting against it, they approved of it.¹⁰⁷ Strangely, even during this conservative period, Leont'ev could still relate to Herzen and Mill. He wrote that Herzen always felt 'aversion to this average European in his formal suit and top hat [...], so unbelievably prosaic, carrying no ideal in his soul other than transforming everything and everybody into something like himself'.¹⁰⁸ 'Herzen', he added, 'wanted poetry and strength in human characters. J. S. Mill wants the same; [...] bourgeois assimilation horrifies him'.¹⁰⁹ Leont'ev quoted in full (and with much relish) Mill's passage about growing homogenization of cultures and social groups in Europe. Like Herzen, he was particularly impressed by Mill's Chinese metaphor. He italicized the whole sentence in which Mill brings up the China example.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁴ Leont'ev, 'Srednii Evropeets', pp. 7–8.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., pp. 14–15, 20.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 47.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 62.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 28.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 29.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 32.

But other than that, Leont'ev now had little in common with Mill. In the decade after the publication of *On Liberty*, he read Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government* and the *Subjection of Women*, both of which he found highly disappointing and contradictory to the spirit of *On Liberty*. Echoing the point made by his friend and conservative critic of Mill Nikolai Strakhov, Leont'ev argued that Mill's advocacy of women's emancipation would only increase social levelling and 'simplification' (*uproshchenie*) since woman would lose her distinctiveness from man and become 'less original, less of a woman than before'.¹¹¹

Leont'ev's disappointment was palpable. He appears only now to have realized that he had misjudged the degree of Mill's reservations about democracy. He lamented that Mill 'like all liberals continues to believe in European progress', even though he is 'much more afraid of public opinion [...] than of government despotism'.¹¹² Leont'ev blamed Mill for failing to bring his argument about individuality to its logical conclusion and to offer the right solution to the problem of bourgeois mediocrity. Mill, according to Leont'ev, was 'extremely original as a negator [*otritsatel'*] of what he didn't like about progress, namely the assimilation of nations, classes and people, but in his book *Representative Government* he shows himself to be just an ordinary constitutionalist'.¹¹³ Reading *On Liberty* now, Leont'ev noted that the book 'should have been called not "On Liberty" but "On Individuality"'. He thought that Mill 'was mistaken to view full political and social liberty as a necessary condition for diversity of characters'.¹¹⁴

To Leont'ev, Mill's effort to accommodate the needs of independent-minded cultured individuals within the frameworks of democratic order was futile and illusory. 'Mill proposes', he wrote, 'an impossible and unworkable compromise — he wants individual peculiarity and diversity in European thought without individual peculiarity and diversity in European life'.¹¹⁵ The only solution, in Leont'ev's view, is to suspend social mobility, to make sure that 'mingling and assimilation gradually goes down'. The more social groups are divided (by their rights, customs, lifestyles and geography), 'the greater the moral and even intellectual benefits for society'.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Leont'ev, 'Srednii Evropeets', p. 34. On Strakhov's response to the *Subjection of Women*, see Julia Berest, 'The Reception of J. S. Mill's Feminist Thought in Imperial Russia', *Russian History*, 43, 2016, 2, pp. 101–41 (pp. 127–29).

¹¹² Leont'ev, 'Srednii Evropeets', p. 31.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 37–38.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

Leont'ev attributed Mill's liberal commitment to his failure to resist public opinion and remain independent-minded to the end. Mill's example, he argued, raises a question 'whether it is possible for thinkers to be original and diverse [*raznorodnymi*] where the "soil" is already homogenous and unoriginal?'¹¹⁷ The answer was no, despite the fact that many of Mill's liberal and feminist ideas were bold and unconventional, costing him (as he had anticipated) a great many of his followers in the last years of his life.¹¹⁸ To Leont'ev, however, Mill's faith in progress was proof that there was no more room for intellectual originality in Western society. Russia was now his last hope to save the world from cultural degradation.

'The Average European' remained unfinished during Leont'ev's lifetime. In 1889, two years before his death, Leont'ev wrote to his friend in Vienna asking to send him some more material on French and German socialists for the essay. 'Without socialists, how can one discuss this topic?' he noted. In the same letter Leont'ev expressed doubts that he would ever be able to complete the essay, but he hoped that 'even unfinished' 'The Average European' would be 'of value' for posterity.¹¹⁹ In this unfinished (but well written and readable) form it was published posthumously in 1912, as part of the first collection of his works.

* * *

On the liberal side, the reaction to *On Liberty* was more complex. Mill's critical statements about democracy and modernity presented no small problem for many of his liberal reviewers in Russia. Influenced by socialist ideas (in much greater degree than their British counterparts), the Russian intelligentsia had always been preoccupied with the problems of poverty and social inequality.¹²⁰ For them, the emergence of shared culture and the narrowing of the social gap between different classes was a welcome, not a worrisome development. They looked at it from the viewpoint of people's

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 34.

¹¹⁸ See Nicholson, 'Reception', pp. 467–68.

¹¹⁹ Leont'ev, 'Srednii Evropeets', p. i.

¹²⁰ As Gary Hamburg puts it, in Russia 'the line of demarcation between socialism and left liberalism was to remain indistinct' until the very end of the tsarist regime. See Gary Hamburg, 'Introduction: An Eccentric Vision: The Political Philosophy of B. N. Chicherin', in B. N. Chicherin, *Liberty, Equality and the Market*, ed. Gary Hamburg, New Haven, CT, 1998, pp. 1–68 (p. 15). See also, Dowler, 'The Intelligentsia', pp. 263–85; Randall A. Poole, 'Nineteenth-century Russian Liberalism: Ideas and Realities', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 16, 2015, 1, pp. 157–81 (pp. 176–81). Poole calls Russian liberalism distinctly 'humanistic'.

well-being rather than that of the individual's interests and the needs of the cultivated few, as did Leont'ev. Mill's pessimism over the cultural impact of democracy came, therefore, as a surprise to his liberal followers in Russia. By the time *On Liberty* became available in translation, Mill already had a well-established reputation in Russia as a champion of progress and philosopher with socialist sympathies — a reputation enhanced by the intelligentsia itself who tended to read many of their own socialist assumptions into Mill's works.¹²¹ Against this backdrop, their reaction to *On Liberty* proved ambivalent: they commonly praised his defence of freedom of speech and expression but tried to downplay or gloss over his critique of modernity and democracy. Reluctant to criticize Mill openly, some omitted to mention the issue altogether.

The very first liberal response to *On Liberty* published in Russia was typical of this attitude. It was written in 1868 by the economist Vasilii Pokrovskii.¹²² The purpose of Pokrovskii's article, as he announced in the introduction, was to 'relate the content [*izlozhit' soderzhanie*]' of the book which 'drew the attention of all the thinking European public' but 'remained unavailable in Russian translation'.¹²³ Pokrovskii was either unaware that *On Liberty* had been already published (with significant censorship cuts) by the journal *Ekonomist*,¹²⁴ or, perhaps, he chose to ignore the *Economist*'s translation in order to present his own version. The ninety-page summary he provided focused mostly on those passages in *On Liberty* where Mill discusses the social benefits of the freedom of speech and conscience. However, far from sticking to the summary (which consisted of a paraphrase and loose translation), Pokrovskii injected into Mill's text a great deal of his own, socialist-inspired ideas without making, in most cases, a proper distinction between the original text and his insertions.

To Mill's argument that morality is always shaped by the dominant social class Pokrovskii added: 'Clearly, in our times, the moral code [...] pays more attention to the interests of capitalists than those of workers, men than women, etc.'¹²⁵ In a passage where Mill discusses drinking as

¹²¹ See Berest, 'J. S. Mill's *Principles*', pp. 83, 90–92, and 'John Stuart Mill and His Autobiography in Russia', *Journal of Modern Russian History and Historiography*, 10, 2017, pp. 28–70 (pp. 38–39, 64–70).

¹²² V. I. Pokrovskii, 'Lichnost' i Obschestvo (po Milliū)', *Otechestvennye Zapiski*, 1868, 3, pp. 263–312; *ibid.*, 5, pp. 105–46.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 263–64.

¹²⁴ Mill, 'O svobode', *Ekonomist*, 6, 1864, pp. 4–160. On the debate in the Censorship Committee see, A. Nikitenko, *Dnevnik*, 3 vols, Moscow, 1955, 2, pp. 628–29, n.307.

¹²⁵ Pokrovskii, 'Lichnost', 3, p. 269. See also, Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 8.

an example of self-regarding behaviour that should be off limits to society, Pokrovskii inserted a sentence that pointed in a different direction: 'Drinking', he wrote, 'is one of the greatest evils from which the working class is suffering in modern European society'.¹²⁶ Like many Russian liberals, Pokrovskii viewed alcoholism as a socio-economic problem needing active intervention rather than as a personal vice that should be left to the individual's own discretion.¹²⁷ Yet, instead of openly challenging Mill on this point, Pokrovskii altered *On Liberty's* original statement. In a passage where Mill criticizes the attempts of 'the professed philanthropists' 'to agitate' for a complete ban on alcohol consumption, Pokrovskii inserted a statement to the effect that 'every effort to eradicate [drinking] deserves full sympathy [*polnogo sochuvstviia*]', including the total ban on alcohol drinks.¹²⁸

Mill's remark about the American public's attitude towards wealth and luxury provoked Pokrovskii to another, this time more expansive, insertion without forewarning the reader that the words were not Mill's. In the original text, Mill refers to the United States as an example of the country in which the opinion of a democratic majority has become an oppressive force for the minority of the rich. Wealthy people, according to Mill, find it difficult to spend their money without 'incur[ing] popular disapprobation'. If the public continues to exercise the 'right of veto on the manner in which individuals shall spend their incomes, [...] it may become infamous [...] to possess more property than some very small amount'.¹²⁹ Pokrovskii's rendering of the passage, however, was much different. Mill's words about 'popular disapprobation' were amplified by a passionate, page-long tirade against poverty and inequality which entirely shifted the focus of Mill's discussion. The inserted passage began with the following statement: 'It is easy to understand why the people [*narod*] disapprove of individuals who live an excessively luxurious life.' Pokrovskii then argued (in the manner of Nikolai Chernyshevskii) that spending money on luxuries diminishes the amount of capital available for the production of 'valuable goods' — the goods that constitute a necessity for the majority of people. And poverty, he added, is always accompanied by 'ignorance', 'diseases, high mortality' and 'all sorts of vices and crime'.¹³⁰ The remedy that Pokrovskii proposed

¹²⁶ Pokrovskii, 'Lichnost', 5, p. 119.

¹²⁷ See, for instance, N. I. Grigor'ev, *Alkogolizm kak obshchestvennoe zlo*, St Petersburg, 1908.

¹²⁸ Pokrovskii, 'Lichnost', 5, p. 119. See also, Mill, *On Liberty*, pp. 91–92.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 90.

¹³⁰ Pokrovskii, 'Lichnost', 5, p. 116.

was more in keeping with the spirit, although not with the letter of *On Liberty*: 'legislative measures' against luxury, he wrote, 'very rarely achieve the desired goal'; instead there should be more public discussion about the deleterious effects of expenditures on luxury. 'It is necessary', he argued, 'that each member of society be aware of his economic and moral ties with society as a whole'.¹³¹

More importantly, Mill's concern about the consequences of social homogenization under democracy was barely noticeable in Pokrovskii's summary.¹³² By adding a few words of his own and excising the contentious passage, Pokrovskii significantly softened Mill's disapproving tone. He ignored Mill's complaint that 'the desire of rising becomes no longer the character of a particular class but of all classes', and that 'the political changes of the age [...] tend to raise the low and to lower the high'. Instead he wrote, with a note of optimism, that 'political reforms promote the equalization of classes [*uravnenie soslovii*]', implying a different message than Mill intended.¹³³ Mill's critical remark that 'every extension of education' strengthens assimilation was made to sound more positive because Pokrovskii emphasized the broader societal benefits (rather than drawbacks) of assimilation through education. He pointed to the 'exchange of ideas' and 'improvement in people's education [*uluchshenie narodnykh shkol*]'.¹³⁴ It is notable that Pokrovskii used the term, *narodnye shkoly*, absent from Mill's text, which in Russia referred to elementary schools accessible to the lower classes. In this heavily edited version, Mill's sense of unease over the spread of increasingly uniform education and reading habits was all but removed. The conclusion he wanted readers to draw from Mill's discussion of homogenization was that the assimilation of classes is a progressive development for society at large, although it poses some obstacles to those individuals with distinct personalities who want to assert their independence. Clearly, for Pokrovskii, a left-leaning liberal, the benefits of democratic homogenization far outweighed the dangers, but once again he eschewed criticizing Mill.

A similar strategy of positive bias and selective reading was adopted by Iurii Rossel', a liberal publicist writing for the journal, *Vestnik Evropy*, popular among the intelligentsia. In 1874, a year after Mill's death, Rossel' published a comprehensive review of Mill's life and thought, the first

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 117.

¹³² Ibid., 3, p. 312.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

attempt at Mill's intellectual biography in Russia.¹³⁵ An admirer of Mill, who emphasized communitarian rather than individualistic strands in Mill's philosophy and treated *On Liberty* as a work seeking 'progress' and 'humanity's improvement', Rossel' put a positive spin on Mill's pessimistic remarks about modern democracy. He interpreted Mill's discussion of social tyranny as a political message about the low level of education, culture and political engagement among the working people.¹³⁶ If Leont'ev found elitist notes in Mill's comment on the spread of increasingly uniform education in modern society, Rossel' saw in Mill's words a concern for the quality of upbringing and education which 'new generations' receive.¹³⁷ Where Leont'ev and Herzen perceived only disapproval in Mill's attitude toward social homogenization, Rossel' assured readers that 'far from noting only the tendency towards levelling of individual character, [...] Mill admired [...] those social processes which [...] strengthen people's devotion to the common well-being'.¹³⁸

Similar to Pokrovskii, Rossel' often injected his own ideas into Mill's arguments without making a clear distinction between his voice and Mill's. For example, after citing Mill's characterization of the middle classes as an embodiment of mediocrity, Rossel' made the following comment: 'Of course, such a situation is far from attractive [*ne privilekatelno*], but one should not be indignant about this phenomenon because it is only a reflection of the low state of education in today's society'.¹³⁹

In the same manner, Rossel' enlarged Mill's defence of individual liberty by stressing the social benefits of allowing individuals to cultivate their creative energy. Fusing together statements from Mill and his own thoughts, Rossel' wrote:

In current society, the individual's private life is so stifled and complicated by social customs [...]. The main element of personal happiness — freedom in self-regarding actions [...] is almost completely absent. People do not even know what they live for. Instead of nurturing their energy and abilities to act for the sake of general happiness, all social strata, from the upper to the lower classes, live as if under invisible watch.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ Iurii Rossel', 'Dzhon Stuart Mill' i ego shkola', *Vestnik Evropy*, 1874, 221, pp. 5–33, 473–511; 222, pp. 132–68, 667–706; 223, pp. 654–84; 224, pp. 672–719.

¹³⁶ Rossel, 'Dzhon Stuart Mill', 223, p. 658.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 661.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 659.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 673, also p. 777.

Presented this way, Mill's notion of individuality appeared less individualistic and more socially-oriented. The reader was left with the impression that the value of individual freedom advocated by Mill lay ultimately in its ability to effect progress and the common good. Mill's implication that only the gifted few could serve as the intellectual engine of society was also thoroughly downplayed in Rossel's review. Without challenging Mill explicitly on his elitist leanings, Rossel' remarked that 'the task of promoting progress and people's well-being' is impossible to achieve without the involvement of the whole society.¹⁴¹

Some liberal reviewers were less coy about criticizing Mill, although in a way that did not challenge Mill's image as a social reformer. The anonymous reviewer from the liberal journal, *Delo*, was puzzled by what he took as a stark contrast between Mill's *Utilitarianism* and his *On Liberty*,¹⁴² which in Russia were issued together in 1869 as a two-part book.¹⁴³ The former work, according to the reviewer, aspires to promote 'the greatest possible harmony between individual and collective interests'.¹⁴⁴ Utilitarianism as a philosophy, he noted, requires that social institutions, law, system of education and public opinion 'make each person realize that his individual happiness consists in the general happiness'. The reviewer urged readers to study Mill's *Utilitarianism* 'as thoroughly as possible'.¹⁴⁵ By contrast, the only useful idea he found in *On Liberty* was Mill's demand for freedom of speech and thought. The rest of the book, 'with the exception of some places, does not present any practical interest and suffers [...] from extreme one-sidedness'.¹⁴⁶ Seeking to explain away this puzzling inconsistency, the reviewer noted that Mill had written *On Liberty* under the influence of emotions, having experienced first-hand the tyranny of public opinion. Even so, the reviewer was tangibly uncomfortable with the need to discuss both books in one essay. 'Regarding this treatise', he wrote, 'I will limit

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 662. See also, Evgeniia Konradi, 'Dzhon Stuart Mill', in Dzhon Stuart Mill', *Utilitarianism. O Svobode*, St Petersburg, 1882, pp. i–cxxxv. Similar to Rossel', Evgeniia Konradi (a left-wing liberal and feminist) stressed Mill's concept of 'social virtues' and his reformist aspirations, especially his advocacy of land reform. She was aware that some readers treated Mill's notion of the tyranny of public opinion as a turn to 'a greater aristocratism' in his philosophy, but she rejected this view, seeing it as some kind of 'misunderstanding'. See *ibid.*, p. lxxxvi.

¹⁴² [anon] 'Novye Knigi. Dzhon Stuart Mill'. *Utilitarianism. O Svobode*, *Delo*, July 1869, pp. 32–43.

¹⁴³ Dzhon Stuart Mill', *Utilitarianizm. O Svobode*, trans. A. N. Nevedomskii, St Petersburg, 1866–69.

¹⁴⁴ [anon] 'Novye Knigi', p. 40.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 43.

myself to only a few remarks'.¹⁴⁷ After an enthusiastic eight-page review of *Utilitarianism*, he indeed devoted only one paragraph to *On Liberty*.

More open criticism came from *Otechestvennye Zapiski*, the most prominent liberal journal in the late 1860s. The reviewer (also writing anonymously) was willing to confront Mill on his contentious statement regarding social homogenization and the impact of technology on modern society.¹⁴⁸ After quoting the passage in full, the reviewer exclaimed: 'Just think about this tirade and you will see what a vicious circle [of contradictions] Mill had put himself in.'¹⁴⁹ In *Utilitarianism* he 'passionately defends the idea of justice', hailing as a sign of progress the disappearance and social condemnation of customs and institutions that uphold the 'division of people into slaves and freemen, nobles and serfs'. In *On Liberty*, on the other hand, Mill criticizes the very same developments, including 'the destruction of social barriers, the development of industry and transportation' as detrimental to progress because in this work 'he conflates the notion of individual freedom with that of diversity'.¹⁵⁰ As a result, according to the reviewer, instead of concluding that modern improvements lead to the emancipation of the individual — a conclusion that seemed indisputable to the reviewer — Mill is led to the false idea of the 'enslavement' of the individual. It is also a mistake to argue, the reviewer added, that uniformity of living conditions is always bad for social and individual progress. It is one thing when people are pressured into a certain mode of life by public opinion, but it is a different matter when they embrace new fashion and innovations willingly and consciously. In the latter case, it means that the greater number of people get to enjoy the fruits of progress.¹⁵¹

Looking at this segment in *On Liberty*, the reviewer noted: 'one might think that Mill is an ardent obscurantist' and backward-looking 'romantic who desires the destruction of industry, railway roads as well as political and civil rights' gained in recent times — all for the sake of preserving 'the diversity of lifestyles [*pestrota zhizni*]'.¹⁵² The reviewer, however, refused to believe it, urging readers to see a wider picture. He used a vivid metaphor to explain Mill's position: Mill is like a person with three eyes — one 'small short-sighted' eye in the back of his head that 'every once in a while looks

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁴⁸ [anon] 'Dzhon Stuart Mill'. *Utilitarianism. O Svobode*, in *Otechestvennye Zapiski*, 1869, 6, pp. 244–52.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 250.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 250–51.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 248–49.

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 251.

backwards' and 'two large far-sighted eyes that look ahead with boldness and determination'.¹⁵³ Although Mill got carried away in his defence of individuality, eventually falling into a contradiction, the rest of the book, according to the reviewer, is 'full of deep and incontrovertible truths', especially the chapter 'Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion'.¹⁵⁴ He was convinced that in Russia the book was going to be 'irreplaceable'. 'It will work imperceptibly, but powerfully, throwing light into [the darkness of] our ignorance, narrowmindedness and nonsense.'¹⁵⁵

* * *

It is striking how differently Mill's view of modernity and democracy was treated in Russia and in Britain. Very few British reviewers commented on Mill's statement about homogenization of classes and cultures in modern society, and those who did, both on liberal and conservative sides, approached it from a different point of view. The contrast is particularly marked when comparing liberal reviews. In Russia, the intelligentsia had always perceived Mill as a philosopher-reformer, whose ideas were intended for practical application rather than abstract contemplation. They tended to read Mill's works, including *On Liberty*, with an eye to socio-economic ideas that might be useful for Russia.¹⁵⁶ By contrast, Mill's British commentators loathed his role as a reformer¹⁵⁷ and sought to keep the discussion mostly within the frameworks of philosophical inquiry about the nature and the scope of individual liberty. Whenever they responded to his warning about modern dangers to liberty, the response was typically framed in more abstract philosophical language that did not make any distinction between the impact of democratic modernity on different social classes. The *Sunday Review*, for instance, argued that in 'this age of great cities' when each person lives in isolation, there is more, not less, personal freedom to enjoy, contrary to *On Liberty*'s pessimistic picture. What a person 'shall read, how he shall think, how he shall educate his children [...] are the questions which he is left to settle [...] for himself'.¹⁵⁸ Whether the modern-age freedom and mobility were accessible to the lower classes was irrelevant to the reviewer's purposes.

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 252.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 252, 247.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 252.

¹⁵⁶ See Berest, 'John Stuart Mill and His *Autobiography*', p. 70.

¹⁵⁷ See Nicholson, 'The Reception', p. 465.

¹⁵⁸ Quoted in Rees, *Mill's On Liberty*, p. 86.

In Russia many liberal reviewers were troubled by what they saw as the elitist and conservative implications behind Mill's critical remarks about democracy and the masses — the implications that the conservative Leont'ev also noted, much to his satisfaction. Mill's minimalist view of the harm principle and societal interference also worried his Russian followers on the liberal side. To the intelligentsia who accepted the Western idea of individual autonomy but notoriously rejected the principles of laissez-faire and ethical individualism,¹⁵⁹ Mill's concept of individual freedom, as presented in *On Liberty*, appeared too individualistic and detached from the needs of the working classes, uncharacteristically for Mill-the reformer.

In Britain, on both sides of the aisle, the perception of Mill's concept of liberty was different and so was the reaction to his critique of democracy. Far from suspecting Mill of elitism, the general trend in British reviews was to see Mill as a radical liberal on the ground that he advocated freedom of expression and the right to choose one's own way of life to all individuals, not just to the cultivated few. For conservative reviewers, such as Stephen, this idea was an anathema, going against the principle of moral authority and received norms in society. He charged that Mill based his concept of liberty on 'too favorable an estimate of human nature' and underestimated the wickedness of human beings.¹⁶⁰ Two of the four arguments in favor of free speech that Mill advanced in his work could apply, according to Stephen, only to the educated minority. 'The incalculable majority of mankind form their opinions differently', and this is how things should remain, in his view.¹⁶¹ As for Mill's view of democracy, Stephen made no direct comment, limning himself to a general statement about the deplorable (as he saw it) tendency of modern liberty 'to raise in the minds of ordinary people a strong presumption against obeying anybody'.¹⁶²

On the liberal side, there was also surprisingly little interest in discussing Mill's reservations about democracy and modernity. John Morley, the editor of *Fortnightly Review*, praised Mill for trusting 'the unwiser part [to] have their own way in what concerns themselves only'. He fully agreed with Mill that the advantages obtained from coercing 'the

¹⁵⁹ See Dowler, 'The Intelligentsia', pp. 263–85; Derek Offord, 'Lichnost': Notions of Individual Identity', in Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd (eds), *Constructing Russian Culture in the Age of Revolution: 1881–1940*, Oxford, 1998, pp. 13–25 (pp. 13, 15); Thomas C. Owen, *Capitalism and Politics in Russia: The Social History of the Moscow Merchants, 1855–1905*, Cambridge, 1981, pp. 58–59; Poole, 'Nineteenth-century Russian Liberalism', p. 178.

¹⁶⁰ Stephen, *Liberty*, p. 20.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 115.

unwiser' into more virtuous behaviour (including sobriety), 'could not overbalance the general inconvenience of the compulsion'.¹⁶³ Ironically, Morley was the only English reviewer to note that '*On Liberty* is in fact one of the most aristocratic books ever written'.¹⁶⁴ This is where Morley quoted some of Mill's disparaging remarks about democracy and the low reasoning abilities of the masses, but he did not mean that as a criticism. His purpose was to refute Stephen's argument that *On Liberty* was based on 'too favorable a view of human nature'.¹⁶⁵ Contrary to Stephen's assertion, Morley argued, Mill's assumptions were entirely realistic, but unlike the social conservatives such as Stephen, Mill believed in the edifying benefits of personal freedom and self-control, even for the 'unwise'. To Morley, a Mill's disciple, freeing the individual from social paternalism was a step in the direction of progress.

To the Russian liberal intelligentsia the idea of progress implied, first and foremost, lifting up the working classes from poverty and ignorance. While they accepted the prospect of capitalist modernity in Russia (unlike Herzen and the Russian Populists), they sought to mitigate the social cost of capitalism through state and social interference, in contrast to the classical liberalism of Mill. The intelligentsia understood that for the lower classes, their life choices were often determined by their socio-economic circumstances rather than conscious enjoyment of freedom. What Mill's followers in Britain came to see as unacceptable paternalism and interference with individual freedom, including philanthropic attempts to instil more virtuous habits in the poor, the intelligentsia in Russia viewed as a service to the people to be carried out with compassion and humility, if not self-sacrifice. For them, the notion of progress (and freedom) was inseparable from the issue of material inequality and access to education. Perhaps this is because the intelligentsia lived under the yoke of paternalistic autocracy and never enjoyed the same status of authority as their counterparts in Britain. Philanthropic engagement with the poor was one of the few forms of civic activism allowed in Russia and even that was always suspicious to the autocratic state.¹⁶⁶ For the British followers of Mill, allowing every individual to live as he pleased was a foundational liberal principle, whereas for Russian liberals, the same principle concealed the danger of social indifference for the fate of the uneducated masses.

¹⁶³ John Morley, 'Mr. Mill's Doctrine of Liberty', in Edward (ed.), *On Liberty*, p. 264.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 266.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ On Russian liberals and philanthropy, see Cynthia H. Whittaker, 'The Women's Movement during the Reign of Alexander II: A Case Study of Russian Liberalism', *The Journal of Modern History*, 48, 1976, 2, pp. 35–69 (p. 42).

But even considering the differences in attitude towards social interference that divided Mill's followers in Russia and in Britain, it is striking that British reviewers did not see any tension between the egalitarian premises of Mill's concept of liberty and his disapproval of social mobility and assimilation in modern society, which puzzled many of Mill's readers in Russia. Mill saw the advent of mass culture and democracy as threatening individuality, while the intelligentsia welcomed democratic modernization as a way of bringing the masses closer to the kind of life that would allow them to become conscious individuals.

* * *

The issue of Mill's attitude towards democracy remains a contested topic in Mill scholarship. In his *Autobiography* Mill called himself a 'thorough radical and democrat' and this is how many scholars today designate Mill's position in the context of his time.¹⁶⁷ Bruce Baum has recently argued that Mill was 'a radical democrat' even by modern standards, despite the fact that he 'qualif[ied] his democratic egalitarianism with reference to a sub-class of working people whose "low moral qualities" leave them unfit' for direct participation in democratic government.¹⁶⁸ On this interpretation, Mill's enthusiasm for the wisdom of the few and his unflattering view of the lower classes do not qualify him for the label 'elitist' because the elite he envisioned was not supposed to be an enclosed cast in the manner of Comtean clerisy, nor would its claim to authority impinge on the autonomy of the less advanced.¹⁶⁹

Against this interpretation, some scholars have asserted that Mill was not a democrat since he did not accept the most fundamental democratic principle — the equality of participation.¹⁷⁰ Those modern critics who concentrate on Mill's economic views vehemently protest the recent 'fashion

¹⁶⁷ See J. S. Schapiro, 'John Stuart Mill, Pioneer of Democratic Liberalism in England', in John Cunningham Wood (ed.), *John Stuart Mill: Critical Assessments*, 4 vols, London, 1987, 1, pp. 78–103 (p. 98); Alex Zakaras, 'John Stuart Mill, Individuality and Participatory Democracy', in Nadia Urbinati and Alex Zakaras (eds), *J. S. Mill's Political Thought: A Bicentennial Reassessment*, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 200–20 (p. 201).

¹⁶⁸ Bruce Baum, 'Millian Radical Democracy: Education for Freedom and Dilemmas of Liberal Equality', *Political Studies*, 51, 2003, pp. 404–28 (pp. 404–05).

¹⁶⁹ Alan Ryan, *J. S. Mill*, London, 2016, pp. 128–29; Capaldi, *J. S. Mill*, pp. 104, 134, 150–51; Rees, *Mill's On Liberty*, p. 127, and somewhat more hesitantly, Alex Zakaras, *Individuality and Mass Democracy*, Oxford, 2009, p. 195.

¹⁷⁰ J. H. Burns, 'J. S. Mill and Democracy, 1829–61: II', *Political Studies*, 5, 1957, 3, pp. 281–94 (pp. 293–94).

in the literature on John Stuart Mill [...] to emphasize his championship of the poor'. Far from that, Mill's economic policies, according to E. G. West, favoured 'the existing *middle class*'.¹⁷¹ In a more extreme manner, Vasilis Grollios asserted that Mill 'adopted all the values' fundamental to capitalism and 'tried to promote working class interests only to the extent that they would not assail the foundations of the capitalist mode of production'.¹⁷² Not surprisingly, Grollios found Mill's concept of liberty and self-improvement elitist and inaccessible to the working classes.¹⁷³ He then concluded that Mill was a liberal (and compared to other liberals of his time, a more radical one) but not a democrat.¹⁷⁴ Looking at the ethical aspects of *On Liberty*, a minority of Mill scholars questioned if Mill was even a liberal, considering the elitist tone of his concept of happiness and progress.¹⁷⁵

Most commonly, Mill is classified as a radical liberal who was open to the idea of democracy, albeit with some qualifications.¹⁷⁶ It is remarkable, however, that neither mainstream nor extreme interpretations pay much attention to the theme of social and cultural homogenization in Mill's writings, and when they do, their scope of examination is limited. Graeme Duncan, for instance, emphasizes the democratic nature of Mill's argument about the importance of cultivating social feelings and removing 'inequalities of legal privilege between individuals and classes', which Mill advanced in his *Utilitarianism*.¹⁷⁷ He concludes that Mill believed in the 'importance of social unity, fraternity and homogeneity — what he called the elements of social union'.¹⁷⁸ But Duncan neglects to mention Mill's statements in *On Liberty* which appear to contradict or at least qualify this conclusion and which Russian readers invariably noted, either with unease

¹⁷¹ E. G. West, 'J. S. Mill's Redistribution Policy: New Political Economy or Old?', in Wood, (ed.), *John Stuart Mill*, 3, pp. 130–45, (p. 130).

¹⁷² Vasilis Grollios, 'J. S. Mill's Views on Democracy after 1848', *Critical Sociology*, 37, 2011, 6, pp. 871–87, (pp. 871–82).

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 878–80.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 882.

¹⁷⁵ M. Cowling, *Mill and Liberalism*, Cambridge, 1963, pp. xii–xiii; Mark Francis and John Morrow, *A History*, pp. 154–55. See also, John Grey, *Liberalisms: Essays in Political Philosophy*, London, 1989, p. 217–28.

¹⁷⁶ See Capaldi, *J. S. Mill*, 357–58; Reeves, *Mill*, pp. 392–94; Georgios Varouxakis and Paul Kelly, 'John Stuart Mill's Thought and Legacy: A Timely Reappraisal', in G. Varouxakis and P. Kelly (eds), *John Stuart Mill — Thought and Influence*, London, 2010, pp. 1–18 (pp. 1–2).

¹⁷⁷ Graeme Duncan, *Marx and Mill: Two Views of Social Conflict and Social Harmony*, Cambridge, 1973, p. 274.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

or with delight as did Leont'ev. The related topic of civilizational decline is also surprisingly neglected in Mill scholarship, in part because, as Levin has pointed out, *On Liberty* is more commonly studied by philosophers than sociologists¹⁷⁹ or intellectual historians. However, Levin too passes in silence over Mill's problematic attitude towards assimilation of classes in modern democracy, focusing more on Mill's concept of civilization. Besides the lack of interest in Mill's sociological ideas in modern scholarship, there seem to be a great deal of reluctance on the part of Mill scholars to deal with the less-than-democratic (or liberal, some might say) aspects of Mill's thought, much as it happened in Russia at a time when Mill enjoyed high popularity among liberals.¹⁸⁰

While the question of Mill's commitment to democratic liberalism lies beyond the scope of this essay, the survey of the Russian responses to *On Liberty* offered here suggests that Mill's criticism of social and cultural homogenization in democracies requires a closer examination than has so far been the case. While the primary benefit would be a better insight into Mill's contested notion of the elite within a democracy, this would also enhance our understanding of the cross-cultural trajectory and context-related transformations within liberal ideology in the nineteenth century. As Levin rightly notes, scholarly disagreements over Mill's commitment to liberalism arise from the fact that liberalism 'is a developing tradition whose features and focus have varied from one time and place to another [...] liberalism was once not what it now is'.¹⁸¹ The reception of Mill in Russia provides a good illustration of the differences between the national variants of European liberalism in the nineteenth century, another topic that calls for a fresh look, now through the lens of reception studies.

¹⁷⁹ Levin, *J. S. Mill*, p. 125.

¹⁸⁰ See, for instance, Dana Villa's ambivalent analysis of Mill's notion of the elite. Dana Valla, *Teachers of the People: Political Education in Rousseau, Hegel, Tocqueville and Mill*, Chicago, IL, 2017, pp. 228–73. The same attitude is common when it comes to Mill's Malthusianism. As Reeves recently admitted, this issue 'is often skipped over by modern liberals' and the subject remains a 'thorny' one. Reeves, *John Stuart Mill*, p. 299.

¹⁸¹ Levin, *J. S. Mill*, p. 137.